

The Art of Asking: A Case Study of Teacher Questioning Strategies in Elementary EFL Classroom Interaction

Dhia Hanan¹

Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang
dhiahanan1103@gmail.com

Amalia Hasanah²

Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang
amaliahasanah_uin@radenfatah.ac.id

Fitri Alya Okta Sukma³

Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang
fitrialyaoktasukma_uin@radenfatah.ac.id

Abstract: While questioning strategies have been extensively studied in secondary EFL classrooms, research focusing on elementary school contexts, particularly in private Islamic schools, remains limited. This qualitative case study investigates the questioning strategies employed by an elementary school English teacher in an EFL classroom and explores the pedagogical considerations underlying the selection of those strategies. Conducted at a private Islamic elementary school in Palembang, Indonesia, the study involved one English teacher with over two years of teaching experience. Data were collected through three classroom observations with video recordings and a semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, and trustworthiness was established through member checking and methodological triangulation. The findings reveal that the teacher utilized three primary types of questions; procedural, convergent, and divergent along with six specific strategies: probing, redirecting, reinforcement, rephrasing, adjusting, and responding to student-initiated questions. Convergent questions were the most frequently used. The teacher's considerations in selecting these strategies encompassed six key aspects: stimulating and maintaining students' interest, encouraging critical thinking and focus, checking comprehension, eliciting target language structures, fostering participation, and managing classroom interaction. The study concludes that the strategic and varied use of questioning techniques creates an interactive and supportive learning environment for young EFL learners. Recommendations include balancing convergent questions with more divergent and probing questions to promote higher-order thinking and implementing cooperative learning strategies to enhance student participation and classroom interaction.

Keywords: *EFL Classroom interaction, elementary school, teacher questioning strategies.*

INTRODUCTION

Building meaningful classroom interaction through questioning is challenging, particularly in Indonesia where English is taught as a foreign language. Many students struggle to express themselves in English and remain passive during lessons (Lestari et al., 2022). They are often hesitant to ask questions when they do not understand or reluctant to provide answers even when they know them. This lack of responsiveness can hinder the learning process and make it difficult for teachers to gauge students' comprehension. Consequently, teachers must

employ strategic questioning techniques that encourage students to become more active and engaged participants (Fitriati et al., 2017).

The importance of questioning strategies in education has been widely acknowledged. Shanmugavelu et al. (2020) described questioning as one of the most critical dimensions of teaching and learning, while Nashruddin and Ningtyas (2020) highlighted its role in stimulating students' involvement. Fitriati et al. (2017) found that questioning strategies foster teacher-student interactions, influencing students' attention and comprehension. Essentially, questioning strategies serve as a bridge between teaching and learning, allowing teachers to assess prior knowledge, scaffold new information, and guide students toward deeper understanding (Astrid et al., 2019).

Various frameworks have been developed to categorize teacher questions. Richards and Lockhart (1994) identified three main types: procedural questions which used to manage classroom routines, convergent questions that requiring short, factual answers, and divergent questions open-ended, encouraging opinions and critical thinking. Blosser (2000, as cited in Astrid et al., 2019) categorized questions into managerial, rhetorical, closed, and open types, noting that approximately 60% of teachers' questions typically require only factual recall. Additionally, display questions, where the teacher knows the answer and referential questions which seeking genuine information, with referential questions found to generate longer and more meaningful responses (Aprina & Andriyanti, 2020). Goodwin (1990, as cited in Ismalinda et al., 2023) identified specific tactics including wait time, probing, redirecting, rephrasing, and reinforcement.

Beyond types of questions, researchers have explored considerations guiding teachers' questioning practices. Richards and Lockhart (1994) proposed six key considerations: stimulating and maintaining students' interest, encouraging students to think and focus, checking students' understanding, eliciting particular language structures or vocabulary, encouraging students' participation, and controlling classroom interaction. These considerations reflect questioning as both a pedagogical and managerial tool.

Several studies have investigated teacher questioning strategies in Indonesian EFL contexts. Agustina et al. (2024) examined questioning strategies at an Islamic Junior High School in Palembang and found convergent questions to be the most frequent, used primarily to maintain students' interest and check understanding. Simatupang (2024) conducted a study at an elementary school in North Sumatra and similarly found convergent questions dominating classroom interactions, though most questions required only short, factual responses that limited students' opportunities for creative thinking. Astrid et al. (2019) investigated questioning in a Madrasah in Palembang, emphasizing its importance in facilitating understanding and encouraging active participation. Aprina and Andriyanti (2020) examined display and referential questions in elementary school classes in Yogyakarta, finding that referential questions elicited longer and more productive responses. Kholisoh and Bharati (2021) highlighted the role of questioning in improving critical thinking, while Burhanuddin et al. (2020) explored how students perceived and responded to teacher questions.

Despite these contributions, several important gaps remain. First, most studies have focused primarily on identifying the types of questions teachers use, with limited attention to the pedagogical considerations underlying teachers' choices (Agustina et al., 2024; Simatupang, 2024). Understanding not only what questions teachers ask but also why they choose particular questions is essential for developing a comprehensive picture of effective

questioning practices. Second, studies that have explored both types and considerations have predominantly been conducted in secondary or higher education settings, leaving elementary EFL classrooms underexplored (Astrid et al., 2019; Kholisoh & Bharati, 2021). Given that young learners have distinct developmental characteristics which including shorter attention spans, emerging cognitive abilities, and varying levels of confidence questioning strategies in elementary contexts warrant specific investigation (Kim, 2015). Third, within the Indonesian context, research on questioning strategies has largely been conducted in public schools or Madrasahs, with limited attention to private Islamic schools where English is formally integrated into the curriculum and where instructional practices may be influenced by the school's unique cultural and religious values (Aprina & Andriyanti, 2020).

To address these gaps, the present study investigates both the types of questioning strategies and the teacher's considerations in selecting them within the context of a private Islamic elementary school in Palembang, South Sumatra. By exploring the relationship between the questions asked and the pedagogical reasoning behind them, this study aims to provide a more holistic understanding of effective questioning practices for young EFL learners. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What were the types of questioning strategies used by elementary school teachers in teaching English during EFL classroom interactions? (2) What considerations did elementary school teachers have for using questioning strategies in teaching English during EFL classroom interactions?

This study contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it enriches the existing literature by offering insights into how questioning strategies are adapted for young learners in an Indonesian Islamic school context, and by highlighting the pedagogical considerations that inform teacher choices. Practically, the findings are intended to provide English teachers with a resource for planning and organizing questions, and to inspire students to become more active participants in English learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design, which is particularly suited for investigating complex phenomena within their real-life contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the questioning strategies used by an elementary school English teacher at a private Islamic school in Palembang, South Sumatra. The school was selected due to its unique context as a non-public institution where English is formally integrated into the curriculum, providing an ideal setting for investigating questioning practices in a relatively underexplored environment.

The participant was one English teacher (coded ASD), selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) permanent teacher status, (2) teaching English at the elementary level, and (3) a minimum of two years of teaching experience. The teacher held a bachelor's degree in English Education from an Indonesian university, which provided a strong pedagogical foundation for implementing various questioning strategies in the classroom. Data were collected using two techniques: classroom observations and a semi-structured interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three non-participatory observations were conducted, during which the researcher sat at the back of the classroom and recorded each question using a structured observation form based on Richards and Lockhart's (1994) framework, supported by video recordings to capture detailed interactions. The observation form was developed based on Richards and Lockhart's (1994) framework, which categorizes

teacher questions into three main types: procedural, convergent, and divergent. This framework was chosen because it provides a clear and practical distinction that is directly applicable to classroom observation and analysis, and it also includes six teacher considerations that align with the second research objective of this study. The categorization of questioning strategies was further informed by Goodwin's (1990) taxonomy of specific questioning tactics, including probing, redirecting, rephrasing, reinforcement, and adjusting or refocusing questions. A semi-structured interview was then conducted with the teacher to explore both the types of questioning strategies used and the pedagogical considerations guiding their selection. The interview was conducted in Indonesian, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a systematic approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analysis followed several practical steps. First, the researcher familiarized herself with the data through repeated review of observation transcripts, interview transcripts, and video recordings. Second, the researcher conducted initial coding by identifying and labeling specific questioning strategies observed in the data. Codes were assigned to each question based on Richards and Lockhart's (1994) framework, as well as Goodwin's (1990) specific strategies. Third, the codes were organized into broader themes that addressed the two research objectives: types of questioning strategies and teacher considerations. Fourth, the observation data and interview data were cross-verified to confirm the consistency of the themes. Finally, the findings were interpreted and discussed in relation to the existing literature. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, two validation strategies were employed: member checking, which involved returning a summary of thematic findings to the participant for confirmation, and methodological triangulation, achieved by cross-verifying data from observations and interviews (Noble & Heale, 2019). Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from the school administration and the teacher and ensuring the anonymity of all participants.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Types of Questioning Strategies

The analysis of three classroom observations and one in depth interview revealed that the teacher employed nine distinct questioning strategies, summarized in Table 1.

Themes	Codes
1. Procedural questions	The teacher asked about students' condition, attendance, and recall of previous lessons.
2. Convergent questions	The teacher asked yes/no questions, factual recall, and questions with only one correct answer to check comprehension.
3. Divergent questions	The teacher asked for opinions, reasons, and alternative answers.
4. Probing questions	The teacher asked follow-up questions to elicit elaboration and deeper reasoning.
5. Redirecting questions	The teacher involved other students to evaluate a peer's answer.

6. Reinforcement through questioning	The teacher used verbal praise and reward-based questions.
7. Rephrasing questions	The teacher rephrased questions when students could not answer, simplifying language without lowering confidence.
8. Adjusting/refocusing questions	The teacher guided off-topic or partially correct answers back to the learning objectives.
9. Responding to students questions	The teacher listened, repeated or paraphrased student questions for the whole class before answering.

Table 1. Types of Questioning Strategies

Procedural questions were used consistently across all observations to manage classroom routines, check readiness, and organize transitions. Examples included “*Are you ready to learn?*”, “*Have you finished your task?*”, and “*Do you still remember last week’s lesson?*” These questions helped establish a predictable classroom structure, which is particularly important for young learners who benefit from clear routines (Kim, 2015). The teacher confirmed this in the interview: “*When I come into the class, I usually ask how they are, uh... like asking about their condition. Ee... for the lesson starter, for example, I say, ‘Do you still remember last week’s lesson?’*”

Convergent questions were the most frequently used type across all observations. These questions required short, factual answers and were employed primarily to check comprehension and maintain students’ attention. Examples included “*Is this statement true or false?*”, “*What did the students do?*”, and “*Does anyone know what the English word for mata is?*” The teacher elaborated during the interview: “*Okay, for example, for a topic, ee... like in grade one, for example about ‘My Body,’ at the end I ask something like, ‘Does anyone know what the English word for mata is?’ or directly, ‘I have two eyes, so what is the English word for that?’ and also mentioned ‘If they answer carelessly or just mention something, I ask again, ‘Is that correct?’ or ‘Are you sure about your answer?’*” The predominance of convergent questions aligns with findings from previous studies, which consistently report that display or convergent questions dominate classroom interactions (Agustina et al., 2024; Simatupang, 2024). This pattern suggests that teachers often rely on close-ended questions for quick comprehension checks and to hold students accountable for their attention. However, the frequent use of convergent questions also raises concerns about the limited opportunities they provide for authentic communication and critical thinking (Aprina & Andriyanti, 2020).

Divergent questions, although used less frequently, generated the most enthusiastic and varied responses from students. These open-ended questions allowed for multiple answers and encouraged students to express their own ideas and experiences. Examples included “*What do you like for breakfast?*”, “*How do you go to school?*”, and “*What do you think a wild animal is like?*” The teacher emphasized the value of these questions: “*I ask, ‘Do you have any other opinions about your friend’s answer?’ or ‘What do you think a wild animal is like?’* Students may provide different answers. Some say a lion; others say a tiger is more dangerous. I then follow up by asking “*Why?*” Such questions transformed the classroom into a more interactive space and supported the development of students’ speaking confidence (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). The teacher’s deliberate use of divergent questions, though less frequent, significantly

enhanced classroom interaction by inviting students to share personal experiences and opinions. This balance between convergent and divergent questions is crucial, as over-reliance on convergent questions may limit students' opportunities for authentic communication (Aprina & Andriyanti, 2020).

In addition to the three main types, several specific strategies were observed. Probing questions such as *"Why?"* and *"Can you tell me more?"* pushed students to elaborate on their initial responses and develop deeper reasoning (Chen, 2016). The teacher illustrated this: *"If a student says 'I'm sad,' then I ask again, 'Why?' because sometimes they respond like, 'Oh, I didn't have breakfast,' or 'I wasn't dropped off by my father.'"* Redirecting questions invited other students to evaluate a peer's answer, creating a collaborative learning environment (Wangru, 2016). The teacher noted: *"I redirect the question to the whole class, for example by asking, 'Do you think this answer is correct?' Instead of correcting the answer directly, I encourage peer evaluation by involving other students."* This approach reduced the teacher's role as the sole judge of correctness and promoted peer-supported learning. Reinforcement through questioning involved verbal praise and reward-based questions that motivated participation. The teacher explained: *"If someone can answer, I usually give a reward, like 'Okay, good,' like that, right... it means they still remember."*

Rephrasing was used to simplify questions when students struggled, helping them respond without feeling humiliated. The teacher emphasized avoiding direct negative judgment: *"I avoid directly judging students by saying 'you are wrong,' because it might make them feel down."* Adjusting/refocusing questions gently guided off-topic answers back to the lesson objectives. The teacher explained: *"If their responses go beyond the topic, I guide them back to the lesson by reminding them to stay focused on the material being discussed."*

Finally, the teacher demonstrated effective responding to student questions by listening carefully, repeating questions for the whole class, and answering with respect, even admitting when she did not know something. *"When students give unexpected answers, I ask them, 'What does that mean?' and it's okay to say, 'Oh, I don't know, what is that?' Sometimes the students explain more so it becomes connected with the students."* This created a democratic classroom atmosphere where students felt their knowledge was valued and where the teacher modeled that it was acceptable not to know everything. Brown and Lee (2015) describe such interaction as *"communication of the heart,"* emphasizing mutual respect and reciprocal actions.

The observations also revealed that different types of questions had varying effects on student participation. Divergent and probing questions were the most effective in encouraging students to express personal ideas and engage in deeper thinking, while convergent questions were more suitable for quick comprehension checks. Furthermore, the distribution of question types varied based on students' proficiency levels. Convergent questions were more frequently directed toward lower and middle-level students to confirm basic understanding, whereas divergent and probing questions were more often addressed to higher-level students to challenge their critical thinking and elicit extended responses. This pattern suggests that the teacher adapted her questioning strategies based on students' abilities, using convergent questions to build confidence among lower-level students while pushing higher-level students with more open-ended questions.

Teacher Consideration in Selecting Questioning Strategies

The interview data revealed six key considerations that guided the teacher selection of questioning strategies, aligning closely with the framework proposed by Richards and Lockhart (1994). These are summarized in Table 2.

Themes	Codes
1. Stimulating and maintaining student's interest	The teacher used varied questions, games, informal expressions, and introduced modern slang to keep students engaged.
2. Encouraging students to think and focus on the lesson content	The teacher used probing questions, open-ended questions, and future-oriented questions.
3. Checking students' understanding	The teacher used convergent questions, display questions, and comprehension checks.
4. Eliciting particular language structures or vocabulary	The teacher used personalization questions and guided students to produce specific vocabulary.
5. Encouraging students' participation in classroom activities	The teacher used redirecting questions, group activities, and step-by-step guidance for shy students like whispering answers first.
6. Controlling and managing the flow of classroom interaction	The teacher used consequence questions, procedural questions, and motivational questions to manage behavior.

Table 2. Teacher Considerations

First, stimulating and maintaining students' interest was achieved through varied activities such as games, group competitions, quizzes, and introducing informal expressions to keep lessons engaging. The teacher stated: *"It shouldn't be monotonous. For example, today we listen to audio, then tomorrow maybe watch YouTube, but if it's too often watching YouTube, they also get bored. So there have to be games sometimes, like group competitions, quizzes, like who are the fastest, things like that."* The teacher also mentioned: *"I sometimes use questions combined with introducing informal or slang expressions in English because students often show curiosity about these expressions"* This reflects an understanding that young learners quickly lose interest when activities become repetitive.

Second, encouraging students to think and focus was supported through probing and future-oriented questions, such as asking about students' aspirations to make learning personally meaningful. The teacher explained: *"I ask individual students about their condition or feelings toward learning English. Then I also directly ask another question, like 'What do you want to be in the future?' For example, they say, 'Oh! I want to go abroad.' Then I tell them, 'If you want to travel abroad, at least you have to be able to speak English.'"* By connecting English learning to students' personal goals, the teacher made the lesson relevant and meaningful.

Third, checking students' understanding was done through convergent questions and comprehension checks at the end of each lesson, allowing the teacher to quickly assess who had grasped the material. The teacher stated: *"At the end of every lesson we usually ask*

questions, right? Like, 'So, how was today's lesson?' and at the end of each lesson, I usually ask students to reflect on what they have learned and to summarize the material." The teacher also explained: "To test understanding, for example, in today's lesson about seasons, I ask, 'Does anyone know how many seasons we have in Indonesia?' and if they can answer, it means they understand."

Fourth, eliciting particular language structures or vocabulary was achieved through personalization questions, such as asking students with pets to describe their animals, which naturally prompted target vocabulary. The teacher elaborated: "I connect questions to students' personal experiences. For instance, I ask students who have pets to describe their animals, such as a rabbit, and then guide them to explain its characteristics in English."

Fifth, encouraging students' participation was facilitated through gentle scaffolding for shy students, such as allowing them to whisper answers first before speaking louder. The teacher described: "If they are shy, I will ask gently, 'Why are you shy?' I try to enter their world, so to speak. If they need a softer approach, I speak more gently and patiently. For example, I let them whisper the answer to me first, and then I ask them to repeat it louder." This approach built students' confidence gradually without forcing them into uncomfortable situations.

Sixth, controlling and managing classroom interaction was accomplished through consequence questions that encouraged students to self-regulate their behavior without the teacher needing to raise her voice. The teacher explained: "When the class becomes noisy or disruptive, I ask questions like, 'We are going to have a break soon, but if you cannot study calmly, the English lesson will take longer. Do you want that?'"

The six considerations identified in this study demonstrate the teacher's deep awareness of young learners' characteristics; short attention spans, varying confidence levels, and the need for engaging and meaningful activities. The teacher's strategies for encouraging shy students to participate, such as allowing them to whisper answers first, reflect a thoughtful and empathetic approach to language teaching (Brown & Lee, 2015). Similarly, the use of consequence questions to manage behavior shows that questioning can be an effective tool for classroom management, aligning with the view that questioning is not merely an evaluative practice but a deliberate instructional strategy (Richards & Lockhart, 1994).

The interaction patterns observed across the three lessons were predominantly teacher-learner interactions, but the teacher use of redirecting questions created moments of learner-learner interaction. When students evaluated their peers' answers, they were not just listening to the teacher; they were actively engaged with each other's thinking. This type of interaction is more meaningful than simple question-and-answer drills because it requires students to listen, evaluate, and respond to their classmates. The interview also revealed that the teacher valued building close relationships with students. The teacher mentioned that shy students became more confident and even greeted her outside class after she gently encouraged them. This suggests that effective questioning is not just about technique but also about the emotional connection between teacher and students. When students feel respected and cared for, they are more willing to participate (Brown & Lee, 2015).

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research conducted in similar Indonesian EFL contexts. The predominance of convergent questions aligns with Agustina et al. (2024), who found that convergent questions were the most frequently used in an Islamic

junior high school in Palembang, and with Simatupang (2024), who reported that convergent questions dominated classroom interactions at an elementary school in North Sumatra. These similarities suggest that Indonesian EFL teachers, regardless of school level, tend to rely on close-ended questions for quick comprehension checks and maintaining student attention. However, the present study extends these findings by also exploring the pedagogical considerations underlying teacher questioning choices, an aspect that previous studies did not deeply investigate. Furthermore, the finding that divergent questions generated more enthusiastic responses and encouraged personal expression supports Aprina and Andriyanti's (2020) conclusion that referential questions elicit longer and more productive responses from elementary students. The use of redirecting and probing questions in this study also reflects Kholisoh and Bharati's (2021) emphasis on the effectiveness of probing in stimulating critical thinking, although their study was conducted at the senior high school level. This suggests that probing and redirecting strategies are beneficial across different educational levels. While previous studies focused primarily on identifying question types (Astrid et al., 2019; Burhanuddin et al., 2020), the present study contributes new insights by demonstrating how the six teacher considerations proposed by Richards and Lockhart (1994) are operationalized in an elementary EFL classroom. The teacher's use of consequence questions for classroom management, for example, aligns with Sulistio and Dwinata's (2023) finding that questioning serves both pedagogical and managerial functions, though their study was conducted in an online ESP context.

Overall, the findings highlight that effective questioning in elementary EFL classrooms requires more than simply asking questions. It involves careful consideration of the types of questions asked, the purpose behind each question, and the individual needs of students. The teacher's ability to adapt questioning strategies to suit the developmental stages and language proficiency of young learners contributed to a supportive, interactive, and well-managed learning environment. The strategic and varied use of questioning techniques created an interactive and supportive learning environment for young EFL learners, demonstrating the interconnectedness of question types and pedagogical considerations in shaping effective language instruction.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the questioning strategies used by an elementary school English teacher and the pedagogical considerations guiding their selection in an EFL classroom at a private Islamic school in Palembang. The findings revealed that the teacher employed nine distinct questioning strategies: procedural, convergent, divergent, probing, redirecting, reinforcement, rephrasing, adjusting/refocusing, and responding to student questions. Convergent questions were the most frequently used, primarily serving comprehension-checking purposes, while divergent questions, though less frequent, proved more effective in encouraging students to express personal ideas and engage in meaningful communication. The teacher also demonstrated six considerations in selecting these strategies: stimulating and maintaining students' interest, encouraging students to think and focus, checking students' understanding, eliciting specific language structures or vocabulary, encouraging students' participation, and controlling classroom interaction. These considerations reflect the teacher's awareness of young learners' developmental characteristics and the need to adapt questioning strategies accordingly.

The study concludes that effective use of varied questioning strategies creates an interactive and supportive learning environment for young EFL learners. The teacher's ability to combine multiple strategies and consider students' developmental stages contributed to meaningful language learning experiences. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on questioning practices in EFL contexts by offering insights into how questioning strategies are adapted for young learners in a private Islamic school setting and by highlighting the pedagogical considerations that inform teachers' choices as an aspect often overlooked in previous studies.

For future researchers, it is recommended to conduct similar studies in different elementary school contexts, including public schools where English may not be formally integrated into the curriculum. Researchers may also broaden the scope of participants to include multiple teachers or multiple grade levels, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of questioning strategy use across different levels. Mixed-methods designs that combine classroom observations and interviews with student perspectives or quantitative measures, such as student engagement surveys or pre- and post-tests of comprehension, are also encouraged. Additionally, comparative studies between novice and experienced teachers could provide insights into how questioning strategies develop over time. Finally, future research could investigate the direct impact of specific questioning strategies on student learning outcomes or develop professional development programs based on effective questioning frameworks.

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